

U.S. Sues Snepp for Breach of Contract

Professor to Help Defend CIA Author

By Henry S. Bradsher
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A leading constitutional lawyer, Alan Dershowitz of the Harvard Law School, is expected to challenge an administration decision to prosecute a former CIA agent for writing a book about the fall of Vietnam.

The author, Frank W. Snepp III, said yesterday that Dershowitz had agreed to defend him after Attorney General Griffin Bell announced plans to sue Snepp for breach of contract.

Snepp's book, "Decent Interval," said the CIA abandoned thousands of its Vietnamese agents in the evacuation of Saigon three years ago. Snepp argues that the United States was ill-prepared for the collapse of Saigon because senior officials were deceived about Communist intentions.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has been looking into the charges but the administration has declined to discuss them.

THE BOOK'S PUBLICATION last autumn angered CIA director Stansfield Turner. He publicly accused Snepp of breaking his CIA secrecy oath and asked the Justice Department to do something about it.

Turner was believed to be concerned not only about Snepp's book but also about the precedent which it would set. The agency is in the process of firing 820 members of its covert operations division, some of whom might also be inclined to write books.

The Justice Department declined to try to halt distribution of the book, but yesterday Bell said the government would sue Snepp for breach of his contract with the CIA.

Answering a reporter's question in New Orleans, where he was attending an American Bar Association meeting, Bell said Snepp had signed a CIA secrecy agreement that gave the agency the right

of prior review before publication. But Snepp refused to submit his book to the CIA, Bell said.

A Justice Department source said a civil suit would probably be filed soon seeking to seize Snepp's income from the book. "The only thing we're trying to do is defend the validity of the secrecy oath," the source said.

IN AN INTERVIEW, Snepp denied he had broken the spirit of the oath because he had not revealed CIA sources or methods. He had followed the oath's provision for taking complaints about the Vietnam evacuation to the agency's inspector general but he had been turned away, Snepp said.

He decided to publish his book after senior government officials, including former CIA Director William Colby, selectively leaked information on the evacuation to favorite journalists, Snepp said. "Secrecy is not divisible," he said, contending that if the oath was not binding on Colby then it should not apply to him.

While teaching law at Harvard, Dershowitz has built a reputation as one of the nation's leading civil liberties lawyers. He has defended a wide range of clients, from "Deep Throat" actor Harry Reems to Patricia Hearst to dissident professors.